

Chapter 5

The Speaker and the Press

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Thirteen years after he last held the gavel as Speaker of the House of Representatives, Joseph “Uncle Joe” Cannon (R–MO) graced the cover of a new national magazine. It was March 3, 1923, and Cannon, who served as Speaker from 1903 until 1911, had just announced his retirement from the House. The editors of *Time* decided to write a tribute to Cannon and his turbulent times as leader and accompany it with a sketch of the former Speaker on their very first cover. The article on the inside of the magazine is hardly what modern readers would consider a cover story—just a few paragraphs on one page. The magazine wrote:

Uncle Joe in those days was a Speaker of the House and supreme dictator of the Old Guard. Never did a man employ the office of the Speaker with less regard for its theoretical impartiality. To Uncle Joe, the Speakership was a gift from heaven, immaculately born into the Constitution by the will of the fathers for the divine purpose of perpetuating the dictatorship of the standpatters in the Republican party. And he followed the divine call with a resolute evangelism that was no mere voice crying in the wilderness, but a voice that forbade anybody else to cry out—out of turn.¹

Seventy-two years later, a Speaker achieved another first with *Time*—Speaker Newt Gingrich (R–GA) was named its “Man of the Year” for 1995, the first House Speaker ever to be so honored.² These profiles of Cannon and Gingrich are

part of a complex history of the relationship between the Speaker and the press corps.

Several elements appear to affect the kind of relationship a Speaker has with the press corps. Among these elements, raised as questions, are the following: Is the Speaker the opposition voice for the party that does not control the White House? Do the Speaker and his party (they have all been men) have a clearly defined and explained legislative agenda? What kind of personality does the Speaker bring to the job? Is he confrontational? Confident? Or more of a quiet, behind-the-scenes dealmaker?

Perhaps the most important element affecting the relationship between the Speaker and the press has been the changing nature of the press itself. There have been three major eras that help to understand the volatile interaction and interdependence between the Speaker and the press. The first was characterized by partisanship on the part of the press, the second was marked by Speakers who carefully cultivated relationships with a few congressional reporters, and the third was defined by the advent of television and electronic broadcasting. This chapter examines Speakers during each of the three periods, focusing on those who had well-documented relationships with the press.

¹“Uncle Joe,” *Time*, vol. 1, Mar. 3, 1923, p. 2.

²Nancy Gibbs and Karen Tumulty, “Master of the House,” *Time*, vol. 146, Dec. 25, 1995, p. 54.

AN ERA OF PARTISANSHIP

In the earliest days of the House, reporters and the newspapers for which they wrote were explicitly partisan. Their goal was not merely to report the news, but to do so in a way that helped the political party with which they were affiliated. Many reporters found that their fortunes rose and fell with that of their party. So, for example, when the House convened for a lame duck session in November 1800 after the defeat of the Federalists:

Samuel Smith of the *Intelligencer* and John Stewart of the *Federalist* were on hand to cover its debates, and the two reporters petitioned for a place on the House floor. Federalist Speaker Theodore Sedgwick cast a tie-breaking vote against them, on the grounds that their presence would destroy the dignity of the chamber and inconvenience its members. When the *Intelligencer* challenged the Speaker's ruling, Sedgwick ordered editor Smith banned from the House lobby and galleries. The election of Thomas Jefferson, together with new Republican majorities in Congress, vastly improved Samuel Smith's fortunes. The House welcomed him back, and in January 1802 voted forty-seven to twenty-eight to find room on the floor for the reporters.³

At first, the most important role played by reporters in the Capitol was that of recorders of debate, taking down for the record the debates of what went on in the House and the Senate. Those summaries were made available to newspapers outside Washington, which were free to use them or not. Eventually, newspapers began hiring "letter writing" correspondents, who would sit in the House and Senate galleries and compose commentaries on the actions of the two Chambers that would then be sent home to their local newspapers. By the Civil War, there was an identifiable press corps in Washington whose members focused most of their attention on Capitol Hill.⁴

Reporters not only shared the political ideology of some of the Members they covered, they also worked for Members during congressional recesses. Newspapers could not afford to pay reporters for a full year's work when Congress was in recess for a good portion of the time; so reporters turned to the people they covered to find additional work. Many were hired as clerks for

committees or secretaries for Members themselves.⁵

This made for an interesting relationship between the Speaker and the press corps. During the winter of 1855–1856, for example, Horace Greeley, a powerful editor and reporter for the *New York Tribune*, became deeply involved in the hotly contested race for Speaker, even though he was not a Member of the House.⁶ Greeley wanted to see Representative Nathaniel Banks (D-MA) elected because of Banks' antislavery policies. Greeley filed daily dispatches from the House as Members cast ballot after ballot trying to elect a Speaker, and he made it clear he favored Banks and worked on his behalf. "After the House cast its 118th unsuccessful ballot, Representative Albert Rust (D-AR) proposed that all leading contenders withdraw in favor of a compromise candidate." Greeley wrote a letter strongly opposing Rust's plan, and the day after the letter appeared in the *Tribune*, Rust encountered Greeley and severely beat him. Greeley, however, recovered sufficiently to write stories about Banks' election as Speaker on the 133d ballot.⁷

Reporters were so involved in the politics of Washington that many also decided to run for office themselves. The first journalist to become Speaker of the House was Schuyler Colfax, a Republican from Indiana, who served as Speaker from December 7, 1863 through March 1869.

Schuyler Colfax's election as Speaker had brought special pleasure to the press . . . Now one of their own—the proprietor and occasional letter writer to the *South Bend Register*—presided over the House of Representatives. . . . To celebrate Colfax's election as Speaker, the Washington Press corps hosted a dinner in his honor, one of the first of what became a favored device for bringing together reporters and politicians in a social setting. "We journalists and men of the newspaper press do love you, and claim you as bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh," said toastmaster Sam Wilkeson. "Fill your glasses, all, in an invocation to the gods for long life, greater successes, and ever-increasing happiness to our editorial brother in the Speaker's Chair." . . . Having sprung from the press, Speaker Colfax applied the lessons of his profession skillfully, making himself always available for interviews, planting stories, sending flattering notes to editors, suggesting editorials, and spreading patronage. He intended to parlay his popularity with the press into a national fol-

³ Donald A. Ritchie, *Press Gallery: Congress and the Washington Correspondents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 12. Hereafter referred to as Ritchie, *Press Gallery*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶ Greeley had been elected as a Whig to the 30th Congress, from December 4, 1848 to March 3, 1849.

⁷ Ritchie, *Press Gallery*, pp. 50–51.

lowing that would make him the first journalist in the White House."⁸

But the Speaker of this period who would transcend even Colfax's popularity with the press was James G. Blaine (R-ME). Blaine came to politics directly from journalism—he had been the part owner of the *Kennebec Journal*, and later accepted the editorship of the Portland, ME, *Advertiser*. Blaine was elected to Congress in 1862, and served as Speaker for three Congresses, from 1869 to 1875. He was a contender for the Republican Presidential nomination in both 1876 and 1880, and was the party's nominee in 1884.⁹

Blaine used his news experience to win over the Washington press corps. "Blaine courted correspondents for Republican and Democratic papers alike and learned how to give reporters what they wanted. Having begun as an editor and reporter, rather than as a lawyer, he employed his instinct for news and genius for self-advertisement to generate an immense and devoted national following."¹⁰

Blaine took care to cultivate personal relationships with reporters, calling them by their first names and seeking them out with news. He also came up with unique ways to get his point of view into the newspaper. "Blaine invented the Sunday news release, recognizing that anything distributed on that slow news day would get prominent display in the Monday papers. He experimented with the semipublic letter, intended more for the press than for its nominal recipient. He floated trial balloons to test public sentiment, and disavowed them if they burst."¹¹

"No man in America better understood the ways and means of reaching the public ear through the newspaper press than Blaine," wrote correspondent David Barry. Blaine actively pursued reporters, regardless of their party, but "if a reporter wrote critically of Blaine he found himself cut off from this important source," Barry wrote.¹²

Blaine's intense attention to press relations served him well during the Credit Mobilier scandal. Lobbyists were accused of giving Members

of Congress stock in Credit Mobilier, a Union Pacific Railroad subsidiary, at par value, i.e., less than half its market price, sometimes without making Members pay for the stock at all. Speaker Colfax was accused of participating in the stock dealings, and the scandal contributed to the demise of his career. Blaine, however, who also stood accused of obtaining stock at less than market value, decided to take on his accusers and managed to weather the storm.

Blaine's broker, James Mulligan, had kept letters from Blaine about the stock deals, which investigators wanted to make public. Blaine went to Mulligan's hotel room in Washington and took the letters. Then, from the floor of the House, Blaine read selected portions designed to clear himself of the charges. To the amazement of his opponents, he was successful, though it became clear later that he had edited the letters rather substantially in their reading to the House.¹³

The Credit Mobilier scandal left a lasting imprint on the relationship between the press and Congress, as noted by Henry Boyton, an influential reporter for the *Cincinnati Gazette* in post-Civil War Washington. Boyton wrote that the scandal marked a turning point in the relations between the press and the politicians they covered:

The general relations of friendship between the two classes continued, however, without marked interruption to the days of the explosions over Credit Mobilier and kindred scandals. Up to that time Newspaper Row was daily and nightly visited by the ablest and most prominent men in public affairs. Vice presidents, the heads of departments, heads of bureaus, the presiding officers of the two houses of Congress, and the strongest and most noted men of the Senate and of the House in the grandest period of the Republic's life, were frequent and welcome visitors in the Washington offices of the leading journals of the land. Suddenly, with the Credit Mobilier outbreak, and others of its kind which followed it, these pleasant relations began to dissolve under the sharp and deserved criticism of the correspondents. To this situation succeeded long years of estrangement. Newspaper Row was gradually deserted by the class named.¹⁴

The press also became concerned about the many reporters who lobbied the government at the same time they were writing stories about Congress. In November 1877, Boyton and other

⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

⁹ *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: James T. White and Company, 1891), vol. 1, pp. 137–139.

¹⁰ Ritchie, *Press Gallery*, p. 131.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 138.

¹² Ibid., p. 137.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 139–142.

¹⁴ Henry V.N. Boyton, "The Press and Public Men," *Century*, vol. 42, Oct. 1891, p. 855.

leaders of the press met with House Speaker Samuel Randall (D-PA) to discuss press gallery accreditation. Over the next 2 years the journalists created a set of rules that defined who could be an accredited journalist, a plan that was adopted by a gathering of reporters in 1879. The House agreed to the plan later the same year, and the Senate followed suit in 1884. Under the plan, a group of five journalists, called the Standing Committee of Correspondents, would monitor the galleries and be responsible for ensuring that lobbyists did not use the facilities reserved for reporters.¹⁵

The press was also in a major transition at this time, from partisan newspapers that covered the Capitol with an ideological intent, to money-making businesses, where getting the news was what mattered. "From the 1860s to the 1920s, the newspaper served less and less well as a medium of traditional exuberant partisanship," wrote media scholar Michael McGerr. By the 1870s, an independent press, focused more on a "restrained and factual style" had emerged, a development aided by the creation and expansion of the Associated Press.¹⁶

These elements—the development of a less partisan press, the creation of a formalized structure for journalists within Congress and the distance between the press and politicians following the Credit Mobilier scandal—marked the beginning of a new period in the relationship between the Speaker and the press, a time when many reporters were viewed by Speakers with suspicion, but a few came to be regarded as trusted allies and friends.

"THE BOYS" OF THE PRESS

Speaker Joe Cannon, who was Speaker from 1903 to 1911, divided the press into two groups—those who regularly covered Capitol Hill and those who did not. For the former, Cannon had praise and even some affection—in 1908 he was an honorary pallbearer at the funeral of Crosby S. Noyes, editor in chief of the *Evening Star*, then

the leading Washington daily, for example.¹⁷ It was the other reporters, those who did not report out of Washington regularly, who earned Cannon's ire.

I was always fond of the newspaper boys in Washington. Few of them ever betrayed my confidences, and they said many nice things about me. For the great part they were honorable men, animated by decent instincts. It was significant that during the "muckraking" campaign that flourished from about 1907 to 1911, few, if any of the regular newspaper men in Washington took part. Their work was to report facts, not to deal in slander and half-truths. The "muckrakers" were generally men unfamiliar with Washington, politics or men in political life. I attended Gridiron dinners regularly, for the Club was always kind enough to ask me to go.¹⁸

This distinction between the "regulars" and those who did not spend their time at the Capitol was adopted by many Speakers who followed Cannon, regardless of their political affiliation. To some extent, it has influenced how Speakers from Cannon on related to the press.

Cannon, known to friend and foe as "Uncle Joe," was a major national figure during his speakership, particularly in 1910 during the struggle with a group of insurgent House Republicans over the scope of his control. He became a favorite subject of editorial writers and cartoonists, who called him a "czar" or a "tyrant." The Speaker blamed the bad press, or the "muckraking" as he called it, on what he said was a cabal of newspaper reporters and editors who had wanted him to support changing the tariff on woodpulp and print paper.

According to Cannon, a newspaper editor by the name of Herman Ridder said he would help Cannon obtain the 1908 Republican Presidential nomination if Cannon would support the changes to the tariff. Cannon said later he had no idea if Ridder could have helped him win the Republican nomination, but he thought it was clear Ridder could hurt him for not going along. "[A]nyone who read the papers for the three years or so following 1907 must remember the success that he or someone else achieved in a campaign of vilification, virtual misrepresentation, and personal abuse of myself, along with

¹⁵ Ritchie, *Press Gallery*, p. 109.

¹⁶ Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865–1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 107; Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978), p. 4.

¹⁷ "Mr. Noyes at Rest," *Washington Post*, Mar. 1, 1908, p. 1.

¹⁸ Joseph G. Cannon, *The Memoir of Joseph Gurney "Uncle Joe" Cannon*, as transcribed by Helen Leseure Abdill (Danville, VA: Voorhees Printing Co., 1996), p. 132.

the responsible Republican leaders of the House.”¹⁹

Whatever the reason, Cannon certainly saw his fair share of critical coverage by the national press, as documented by scholar Scott William Rager.

Extensive and sometimes biased press coverage of the rules controversy had alerted the public to the fact that Speaker Cannon might not be quite the benevolent character they had once believed him to be.

The Baltimore Sun cited Cannon as being “the very embodiment of all the sinister interests and malign influences that have brooded over this land and exacted toil from every hearthstone.” Both *Colliers* and *Success* magazines had been running articles in regular installments that not only detailed the Speaker’s wrongdoings but also praised the insurgents. When a large segment of the public responded by turning against Cannon, some moderate Republicans realized that their own political futures would soon be in jeopardy if they continued to support him. The press, therefore, did the insurgents an absolutely invaluable service. The Speaker was angered by the press assault and the public response to it but refused to make changes in the way he ran the House.²⁰

The *Washington Post*, in a profile of Cannon, began the story like this: “The central figure in every discussion of the American Congress today is the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Joseph Gurney Cannon. He is as much of a character in American politics as was the rugged Andrew Jackson, or the terrible John Randolph of Roanoke, or the imperious Roscoe Conkling.”²¹

As Speaker, Cannon was in charge of the House press gallery, an organization of reporters established in 1890. The 1890 agreement between the House and the press corps established a permanent gallery on the third floor of the Capitol from which reporters could watch House floor action. In addition, the press gallery had office space for reporters to make and receive phone calls and write their reports.²² Cannon delegated control of the gallery and the care of the press to his secretary, L. White Busbey, a former

Washington correspondent for Chicago newspapers:

The Speaker had charge of the press gallery, and I turned this over to Busbey, telling him that I would hold him fully responsible for keeping the boys happy, and that he was not to bring any disputes to me unless there was no escape . . . The newspaper boys always seemed to have a hankering for stories and Busbey relieved me of too much interruption by them. Busbey had a busy life, working to all hours.²³

Speakers who followed Cannon, also appeared to enjoy the company of Capitol Hill reporters. Speaker Frederick H. Gillett, for example, joined a dozen members of the Senate press gallery and an equal number of Senators in a golf game in 1922.²⁴

Speaker Nicholas Longworth (R-OH), Speaker from 1925 to 1931, played the inside game with reporters to great advantage. The charming husband of Alice Roosevelt was extremely popular with the press. He was able to move portions of President Coolidge’s legislative program through the House in just 2 short months, for example, and won plaudits from the press for this achievement.²⁵

Said another writer: “. . . an indisputable aura of glamor did hover around Nicholas Longworth. He was even profiled by a movie magazine, and though he was the only Speaker in history to whom the klieg lights were so attracted, there was no egoistic pretension about him.” Further, “Another result of Longworth’s characteristic detachment—or cynicism, some call it—was to endear him to newsmen who had been born knowing that life would go on no matter what the Congress decided. Many of them became enthusiastic fans of Longworth, and they tendered him the kind of praise few politicians have ever enjoyed.”²⁶

His method of dealing with the press was described in detail in an *Associated Press* article, written by Walter Chamblin, that was included in a biography of Longworth written by his sister. The story sets the scene in Longworth’s pri-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 140–141.

²⁰ Scott William Rager, “Uncle Joe Cannon: the Brakeman of the House of Representatives, 1911–1915,” in Roger H. Davidson, Susan Webb Hammond, and Raymond W. Smock, eds., *Masters of the House: Congressional Leadership Over Two Centuries* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), p. 77.

²¹ Frederick J. Haskin, “The American Congress: XX. Speaker Cannon’s Career,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 12, 1909, p. 7.

²² This was the first press gallery, designed for the “print” press, or those who wrote for daily newspapers. Over time, both the House and Senate created additional, separate press galleries for the periodical press (such as weekly magazines) and for radio and television reporters.

²³ Cannon, *The Memoir of Joseph Gurney “Uncle Joe” Cannon*, pp. 119–120.

²⁴ Henry Litchfield West, “Scribes Easy for Senatorial Golfers,” *Washington Post*, June 28, 1922, p. 10.

²⁵ Donald C. Bacon, “Nicholas Longworth: The Genial Czar,” in *Masters of the House*, p. 135.

²⁶ Richard B. Cheney and Lynne V. Cheney, *Kings of the Hill: Power and Personality in the House of Representatives* (New York: Continuum, 1983) pp. 156, 158. Hereafter referred to as Cheney, *Kings of the Hill*.

vate office just off the floor of the Chamber after the House had adjourned for the day:

It was in this retreat that the press learned to know and to love him. His door never was closed to a reporter and no matter how muddled the legislative situation might be, Nick ever was smiling and genial. Nothing pleased him more than for the correspondents to arrive with a batch of good stories. He would laugh heartily and then would tell one of his own. His supply seemingly was inexhaustible. It was in such a setting that Nick liked best to discuss affairs with the press. He never cared much for formal conferences, which are so popular with most officials in Washington, although at times a troop of correspondents would arrive from the Senate or downtown departments and insist on such an interview. He always complied, but seldom spoke as freely as he did at the informal gatherings. No matter how his social engagements might pile up, he always found time to attend any gathering of correspondents. He was invited to all . . . Upon a few occasions when the correspondents felt that their prerogatives were being ignored, such as instances usually arising with some new Representative who arrived at the Capitol quite puffed up over the importance of his office, the Speaker each time personally took up the battle for the press. He believed the press of paramount importance in the functioning of the House.²⁷

This easy, comfortable behind-the-scenes relationship with the press allowed Longworth to shape news coverage to his liking in many instances, persuading some reporters, for example, that the House was the predominant Chamber over the Senate during much of his speakership.²⁸

Following Longworth's unexpected death, there followed three one-term Speakers. The first of those, John Nance Garner held views about the press similar to those of Longworth. "He granted few formal interviews to the press, although he admitted a small number of correspondents into his personal circle and sometimes used them for his political purposes. Reporters such as Cecil Dickson, Marquis James, and especially Bascom Timmons were as close to him as any politician."²⁹

Garner, who was Speaker from December 1931 through March 1933, held a regular, daily briefing for the press when the House was in session, possibly the first Speaker to do so. This tradition, of meeting with the press before the start of the day's session to discuss the House's schedule,

continued for more than 60 years until Speaker Newt Gingrich dropped it in 1995.³⁰

A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP

Speaker Sam Rayburn was known to dislike dealing with the press. The Texas Democrat "actively avoided much of the media, especially television. He refused to appear on the popular television talk show of the day, 'Meet the Press,' and routinely avoided most print and broadcast reporters as well . . ."³¹

During at least some of the time he was Speaker, however, Rayburn rented a room in the house of C.P. Trusell, a congressional reporter for the *New York Times*. Rayburn and Trusell were good friends, such good friends that the reporter eventually asked the Speaker to move out. Trusell reportedly was having trouble keeping his information straight, separating what he knew from his own work and what he had learned about the goings on in the House from his friendship with Rayburn, information that could not be reported.³²

Rayburn distinguished between "the press," a generic group he did not like, and certain congressional reporters, who he trusted and with whom he was friends. Two anecdotes illustrate how Rayburn saw this divide. One, recounted in a largely positive biography of the Speaker, shows him helping a reporter he knew. The other shows his disdain for television, a form of media with which he was uncomfortable.

In the first story, the teenage daughter of a reporter who had been at several of Rayburn's press conferences had died. Early the morning after her death, Rayburn went to the reporter's house to offer his condolences. The book continues:

"I just came by to see what I could do to help," he {Rayburn} said. A bit flustered, the father replied, "I don't think there's anything you can do. We're making all the arrangements."

²⁷ Clara Longworth DeChambrun, *The Making of Nicholas Longworth: Annals of an American Family* (New York: Ray Long and Richard Smith, Inc., 1933), pp. 306–307.

²⁸ Cheney, *Kings of the Hill*, p. 158.

²⁹ Anthony Champagne, "John Nance Garner," in *Masters of the House*, p. 152.

³⁰ "Garner and Rainey Reply," *New York Times*, June 26, 1932, p. 21.; Howard Kurtz, "Gingrich Plans to End Daily News Briefings," *Washington Post*, May 3, 1995, p. A7.

³¹ Elaine S. Povich, *Partners and Adversaries: The Contentious Connection Between Congress and the Media* (Arlington, VA: Freedom Forum, 1996), p. 13.

³² Jim Cannon, "Congress and the media: the loss of trust," in *Partners and Adversaries*, pp. 68–69.

"Well, have you had your coffee this morning?" Mr. Sam asked.

"No, we haven't had time."

"Well," he replied promptly, "I can at least make the coffee this morning."

And while Mr. Sam was puttering about in the kitchen, the reporter said, "Mr. Speaker, I thought you were supposed to be having breakfast at the White House this morning."

"Well, I was, but I called the President and told him I had a friend who was in trouble, and I couldn't come."³³

In the second tale, Rayburn explained to Lawrence Spivak, a well-known journalist, why he would not appear on the NBC program, "Meet the Press." "I never go on programs such as yours because some twenty or more years ago I did go on a panel program on the radio and all the folks on the panel got in such an argument that I had enough." The writer continues, "Never having had a very high opinion of publicity, he wasn't going to change his mind about it now. One of the greatest compliments he could pay a colleague was to say, 'He doesn't run around getting his name in the newspapers all the time.'"³⁴

Rayburn was direct with the reporters he did decide to talk to. "He handled the press in the same straightforward way he had since they first started paying him attention. The reporters who came to his office got five minutes for their questions. His answers were short, to the point and off the record. 'You'll have to go somewhere else to get your quotes,' he told them."³⁵

It was clear that Rayburn saw the value in letting certain, selected reporters into his confidence. They were invited to the ultimate insider's meetings, the sessions with the "Board of Education," as it was known, the late-night meetings and drinking sessions of some of the most powerful men in Washington, led by Rayburn in his Capitol hideaway. "In Rayburn's mind, these trusted reporters were different from the rest of the national press; they understood and appreciated the work of the House of Representatives. They also understood the importance of longstanding personal relationships as Rayburn did, and would not sacrifice those rela-

tionships for a single story. It was a true symbiotic relationship."³⁶

Rayburn's contact with this group of media was not necessarily designed to reach out to the country, or to try and build any kind of grassroots coalitions. Rather, he used the reporters, many of whom worked for the country's top news organizations, to communicate with his fellow Members. "Speaker Rayburn perceived relationships with reporters as an advantage internally within the House rather than a conduit to a national constituency. He was far more concerned with what his colleagues read than with what the general public read."³⁷

Rayburn also continued the daily press briefings begun under earlier Speakers. For 5 minutes before the start of the House he would meet with reporters. The questions and the tone of those briefings made it clear he was aiming the information at his fellow House Members primarily. "It was purely an insider's game. Questions focused on arcane procedure or mundane scheduling of business. . . . Observers not initiated to the process would have a difficult time understanding what was going on. House jargon and parliamentary shorthand punctuated answers."³⁸

It was clear that the trust he gave to the reporters was repaid. In a lengthy profile of Rayburn for the *New York Times*, reporter William S. White tells the story of having been in the room when Rayburn was notified of the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and he makes it clear that he would not divulge the specifics of what Rayburn said:

His heavy and very nearly immobile face was still in the shadows and the only movements upon it were the small and barely visible traces of the tears. He swept them away roughly. For a long time, no one said anything at all. Then Mr. Rayburn hunched his shoulders and, looking out unseeingly into the dusk, he spoke slowly in short, hard, phrases as though talking to himself. There, before friends, in words that are yet under the seal of that room (in which this correspondent was among those present), Mr. Rayburn took an oath for the future. Its substance was that Sam Rayburn—Southern Democrat and all—had followed Franklin Roosevelt

³³ C. Dwight Dorough, *Mr. Sam* (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 287.

³⁴ Cheney, *Kings of the Hill*, pp. 177–178.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

³⁶ Joe S. Foote, "The Speaker and the Media," in Ronald M. Peters, ed., *The Speaker: Leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1994), p. 137.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

in life, and that Sam Rayburn would follow Franklin Roosevelt in death.³⁹

Rayburn's dislike of television extended into committee rooms. In 1952, Rayburn decided to ban radio and television broadcasts of House committee hearings, reasoning it was an extension of the ban on televising House action. In 1957, the chair of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, Francis E. Walter (D-PA), implicitly challenged the ban by holding a televised field hearing in San Francisco. He was admonished by Rayburn sufficiently so that no other chair challenged the camera ban.⁴⁰

CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

While Rayburn was a master at using the press to play his inside game, the nature of the press and the relationship between the press and the politicians they covered began to change in such a way that Rayburn's successors, John McCormack (D-MA) and Carl Albert (D-OK), were not able to use the same relationship-based technique for their media plan.

The Vietnam war and Watergate influenced the way reporters viewed both their jobs and Members of Congress. The two events combined to change the relationship between the reporters and their subjects into a much more confrontational posture. Added to that, the growth of television and broadcast as the way Americans were getting their news left Speakers such as McCormack struggling to cope with new demands from rank-and-file Democrats to be more of a national figure and party spokesman. That meant more air time, making television and radio speeches—a role McCormack was uncomfortable trying to fill. “Both the presidency and the television networks grew in stature and visibility during the 1960s while Congress stood silently in the background.”⁴¹

Elected to the speakership upon the death of Rayburn, McCormack served in the Office from 1962 until 1971. As early as 1967, however, there were rumblings among some House Democrats

that Members wanted a more dynamic spokesman. “The question now being asked by his Democratic critics is whether Mr. McCormack, with his gaunt, pale visage and his tendency to talk in patriotic platitudes, has either the intellectual drive or the proper public image to serve as a spokesman for the Democratic party over the next two years,” wrote John W. Finney for the *New York Times*. He quoted an anonymous young Democratic House Member as saying “The trouble with John McCormack is that he is completely out of touch with modern American politics.”⁴²

According to one study, McCormack was mentioned on the nightly news broadcasts of the three major networks 17 times in 1969. Five other Members of the House, including Minority Leader Gerald Ford were mentioned more frequently. In 1970, McCormack jumped to the front of the pack, being mentioned 46 times, but by 1971, he did not make the list of the top 15 House Members to be talked about on the evening news.⁴³ However, it was during McCormack's speakership that the House authorized its committees to make their own decisions about whether to allow broadcast coverage of their hearings or meetings, thus overturning the ban that Rayburn put in place in 1952.

Carl Albert, Speaker from 1971 until 1977, also found it difficult to adapt to the new, changing media environment. When he was elected majority leader under McCormack in 1962, he noted that he had done so with very little media coverage. “I never once got on television. The sum total of my national publicity was a {press} release when I got into the race and a {press} release when I got up to Washington saying I thought I had enough votes to win. I refused to go on television, although I was invited to go on most of the news and panel shows.”⁴⁴ Albert continued his low-profile style throughout his time in the leadership. “As Majority Leader, Albert has attracted little national attention. He has made relatively few televised appearances and

³⁹ William S. White, “Sam Rayburn—The Untalkative Speaker,” *New York Times*, Feb. 27, 1949, p. SM10.

⁴⁰ Foote, “The Speaker and the Media,” in *The Speaker: Leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives*, p. 140.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁴² John W. Finney, “McCormack, 77, Faces Increasing But Disorganized Criticism,” *New York Times*, Dec. 22, 1968, p. 32.

⁴³ Timothy E. Cook, *Making Laws and Making News: Media Strategies in the U.S. House of Representatives* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1989), pp. 192–193.

⁴⁴ Robert L. Peabody, *Leadership in Congress: Stability, Succession and Change* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), p. 77.

has introduced little legislation on his own," a feature story on Albert said.⁴⁵

However, he did take some steps into the media age. Albert was the first Speaker to hire a press secretary. During Watergate, Albert took into account the massive needs of the press, going so far as to begin planning for possible broadcast of House impeachment proceedings against President Richard Nixon:

While uneasy about the carnival atmosphere that was developing around the Judiciary Committee hearings, Speaker Albert tried hard to accommodate the television networks and the rest of the media. When the Judiciary Committee had completed its work, Speaker Albert authorized his staff to make plans for the televising of impeachment proceedings in the House. This was a key decision, because it represented a turnaround from Rayburn's strict ban on television in the House, which had been in effect since the day Albert came to Congress in 1947. Speaker Albert's willingness to open the House to television during this crucial moment in history paved the way for permanent access to the House five years later.⁴⁶

A MEDIA CELEBRITY

Albert's successor, Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill (D-MA) won rave reviews both inside and outside the House for his handling of the media. One reporter called him "the first media celebrity in the history of the Speakership."⁴⁷ Another attributed much of O'Neill's success to his management of the media:

O'Neill has built his mystique through the press. Albert feared the press. O'Neill plays with it like a cat with a mouse. He has killed the tough, post-Watergate press with candor and charm. Ask O'Neill about an alleged gambling ring in a House office building and whether he has quashed a Justice Department investigation into it. O'Neill says no, he knew nothing about it. Then he regales the press with stories and mottos about gambling. He tells the story of going to the Pimlico racetrack as a young congressman and meeting J. Edgar Hoover there. Hoover offers him a lift. He accepts. When they get back to town, Hoover discovers he has taken the wrong car from the parking lot. There are no more questions about the gambling ring.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ "Carl Albert of Oklahoma: Next House Speaker," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, vol. 28, Dec. 25, 1970, p. 3074.

⁴⁶ Foote, "The Speaker and the Media," in *The Speaker: Leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives*, p. 144.

⁴⁷ Alan Ehrenhalt, "Media, Power Shifts Dominate O'Neill's House," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, vol. XXX, Sept. 13, 1986, p. 2131.

⁴⁸ Mary Russell, "Speaker Scooping Up Power in the House," *Washington Post*, Aug. 7, 1977, p. 1.

O'Neill responded to the changing demands of the media by adopting new patterns:

When I became majority leader in Washington, I was interviewed constantly. I was always happy to talk to the press, but I drew the line at the Sunday morning talk shows on television. After a full work week, consisting of long days and frequent late evenings, I insisted on keeping my weekends free for my family and friends. In 1977, when I became Speaker, I started meeting with TV reporters each morning when I arrived at work. Later in the morning, I would hold a news conference before the House opened. I always told the truth, and almost never answered with "no comment." Ninety-nine percent of the time, if you're straight with the press, they'll be straight with you.⁴⁹

O'Neill realized, too, that he could use the daily Speaker's press conference to get the party's message out to the public, as well as fellow Members of Congress.⁵⁰

Despite concerns from his fellow Members, O'Neill agreed to allow C-SPAN broadcasts of House floor action, beginning in 1979, a decision he would later say was one of the best he made as Speaker.⁵¹

As skillful as O'Neill was with the press, it was the 1980 election of Republican President Ronald Reagan and a Republican Senate that really thrust the Speaker on to the national stage. "In the aftermath of the Republican takeover of the Senate in the 1980 elections, the press anointed Speaker O'Neill—now clearly the highest-ranked Democrat in Washington—as chief Democratic spokesman and thus enhanced his media access," wrote one congressional scholar.⁵²

Democrats took a page from Reagan's playbook to urge O'Neill to challenge Reagan's policies—frequently and publicly.

In the early 1980s Ronald Reagan taught House Democrats a lesson about the uses of the media that altered their expectations of their own leaders. Reagan's media skills and the favorable political climate allowed him to dominate public debate and thereby dictate the policy agenda and propagate a highly negative image of the Democratic party. Unable as individuals to counter this threat to their policy and reelection goals, Democrats expected their leaders to take on the task, to participate effectively in national political discourse and thereby promote the membership's policy agenda and protect and enhance the party's image. Unlike rank-and-file

⁴⁹ Tip O'Neill with William Novak, *Man of the House: The Life and Political Memoirs of Speaker Tip O'Neill* (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 227.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

⁵² Barbara Sinclair, "Tip O'Neill and Contemporary House Leadership," in *Masters of the House*, p. 309.

House members, the party leadership did have considerable access to the national media.⁵³

It was a part of a growing realization that the climate of Congress itself had changed. No longer was it enough to make the case for legislation within the Capitol, the public needed to be involved as well. "A decade ago, nearly all influential House members would have said that legislative arguments are won on the floor, by the tireless personal cultivation of colleagues. Nowadays, many of them say that sort of work is only part of the story. Increasingly, they believe, floor fights are won by orchestrating a campaign aimed over the heads of the members, at the country at large. . . . 'Sometimes to pass a bill,' [House Majority Leader] Foley says, 'you have to change the attitude of the country.'" ⁵⁴

Speaker O'Neill used his Office as a "bully pulpit" to challenge the Reagan White House, particularly during his daily press briefings:

An O'Neill press conference these days is a media event, not only because dozens of print and broadcast reporters crowd his office to hear him, but because much of what he says is designed for their benefit. O'Neill often begins with a prepared statement challenging one or another aspect of Reagan administration policy, drafted for him by press secretary Christopher J. Matthews, a glib wordsmith and specialist in one-liners. Often, O'Neill's comments are repeated on the evening news that night; even more often they are printed in the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* the next day.⁵⁵

Republicans saw this as an opportunity to use O'Neill as a target for their anti-Democrat campaign—a strategy that did not succeed:

As part of their 1982 election campaign, Republicans tried to make the Speaker, a heavy, rumpled man with a cartoonist's dream of an old pol face, into a symbol of big, out-of-control government; generic ads with an O'Neill look-alike were run nationwide. As a result, O'Neill became much better known to the public at large than any Speaker before him. (Presumably much to the Republicans' surprise, by the mid-1980s O'Neill not only became a nationally known figure but a highly popular one.)⁵⁶

At the end of his speakership, Tip O'Neill was a nationally known figure. "Sam Rayburn could have walked down the streets of Spokane, Wash., without anybody noticing him," Majority Whip

Thomas S. Foley of Washington [said in 1986], "Tip O'Neill couldn't do that. And it's very unlikely that any future Speaker will be anonymous to the country."⁵⁷

O'Neill remained a popular public figure after leaving office in 1986. "That Speaker O'Neill's autobiography was a best seller and that he received contracts for a variety of high profile commercial endorsements after leaving office showed just how high a Speaker's visibility could climb in the television age," wrote one scholar.⁵⁸

DEMOCRATS AFTER O'NEILL

Speaker Jim Wright (D-TX) continued in the steps of his predecessor, reaching out to the press and maintaining high visibility as an outspoken opponent of many Reagan administration policies, particularly those in Central America. His relationship with the media had peaks and valleys and some of his encounters with the press became verbal battles. "Speaker Wright courted the media aggressively and was more available for television appearances than any of his predecessors. . . . Yet, he also had a more contentious relationship with journalists than previous Speakers, once calling them 'enemies of government.'" ⁵⁹

Wright and the Democratic leadership of the House decided to use the daily press conference even more than O'Neill had to push their priorities. The leadership would meet prior to the press conference and create a message for the day. "Upon completion of the press conference, the other party leaders would remain to talk to reporters in an effort to reinforce Wright's points. Wright also extended contacts to broadcast reporters immediately following the daily print meeting."⁶⁰

When Wright resigned as Speaker in May 1989, his successor, Thomas S. Foley, had a much warmer relationship with the press. Foley cultivated reporters by, among other things, having regular early morning breakfasts with the Cap-

⁵³ Ibid, p. 290.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ehrenhalt, "Media, Power Shifts Dominate O'Neill's House," p. 2131.

⁵⁶ Sinclair, "Tip O'Neill and Contemporary House Leadership," in *Masters of the House*, p. 309.

⁵⁷ Ehrenhalt, "Media, Power Shifts Dominate O'Neill's House," p. 2131.

⁵⁸ Foote, "The Speaker and the Media," in *The Speaker: Leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives*, p. 150.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 151.

⁶⁰ Douglas B. Harris, "The Rise of the Public Speakership," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 113, Summer 1998, pp. 201–202.

itol's bureau chiefs and major newspaper columnists.⁶¹ He also decided to release an unedited transcript of the daily press conferences, which made it easier for reporters to check their quotes and for those reporters who had missed the session to know what had happened. Foley's relationship with the press is evidenced by the following anecdote:

Symbolic of Foley's relationship with the congressional press was the press conference day when members of the press presented him with a T-shirt that many of them had shown up wearing. A cartoon from the *Baltimore Sun* portrayed the Speaker as a bonneted and exasperated nanny surrounded by a pack of childlike adults dressed in knickers and in the middle of a food fight. The text quoted Foley from his June 10, 1993 press conference when he was asked whether there was a lack of leadership being marshaled on behalf of the president's agenda. Foley's response: *Everybody is exercising sufficient leadership. It is the followership we are having trouble with.*⁶²

Foley recognized the limits of what he could do in his daily meeting with the press. "While the traditional daily Speaker's press conference served to influence the perceptions of opinion leaders in Congress and the congressional media, it proved to be a very limited vehicle for reaching the American people," he wrote in his book.⁶³

Foley wrote that he wondered if he should have opened up the daily briefings, known to reporters as pad and pen briefings, to broadcast media. "If I had it to do over again, I would have experimented occasionally with radio and television coverage. The electronic media were represented at the press conferences, but without tape recorders or cameras. It was, perhaps, an anachronism for a Speaker to be carrying on his principal communication with the press through the print media at the same time that the entire House proceedings were being carried live on cable television's C-SPAN."⁶⁴ Foley acknowledged that the audience he wanted to reach required a broader outlet:

When you went on a television program you were trying to reach the public, the press beyond the program itself, and your own congressional colleagues. It depends on the issue, but part of the way you influence your colleagues is by having some impact on public opinion and creating a mood or attitude toward legislation, or explaining what might other-

wise be difficult for the public to understand. You don't do that all alone, but it's part of the task of being Speaker to try to explain the Congress to justify what might be unpopular legislation, to defend the institution during periods when it comes under fire or attack. I think members appreciate that.⁶⁵

A TELEVISION-AGE SPEAKER

No other Speaker to date has had the media exposure of Newt Gingrich (R-GA), nor experienced the highs and lows of such coverage in such a short period of time (he was Speaker from 1995 to 1999). In part, Gingrich's appeal to the media was based on his long-standing reliance on reporters to convey his message to the public. Elected to the House at the same time that cameras for C-SPAN began covering House floor action, Gingrich became well known to C-SPAN watchers for delivering impassioned 1-hour speeches after the daily business of the House sessions was completed. It was C-SPAN that elevated his national visibility, especially after one contentious episode.

As one reporter noted, Gingrich spoke daily to:

{A} sea of empty seats and a nationwide C-SPAN audience largely unaware that the chamber was deserted. This practice so nettled Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill of Massachusetts that he ordered the camera operators to pull back and expose the charade. The fracas that followed led O'Neill to lose his temper and speak of Gingrich's behavior as "the lowest thing I've ever seen." O'Neill's remark had to be stricken from the record as an offense to House rules, the first time since 1797 a Speaker had been rebuked for language.⁶⁶

In brief, Gingrich's use of the media likely contributed to his "climb up the leadership ladder," and eventual election as Speaker.⁶⁷

Gingrich became Speaker when media coverage of Congress was increasing both in kind and in frequency, from the number of print media outlets to Internet publications to radio talk shows. As Gingrich stated: "But by January of 1995, when the new Contract with America class was being sworn in, the amount of congressional media coverage had expanded immensely.

⁶¹ Jeffrey R. Biggs and Thomas S. Foley, *Honor in the House* (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1999), p. 114.

⁶² Biggs, *Honor in the House*, p. 131, italics in original.

⁶³ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 180-181.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁶⁶ Ronald D. Elving, "CQ Roundtable: The Media Whirlwind of Speaker Gingrich," *CQ Weekly*, vol. 51, Dec. 9, 1995, p. 3774. Online version.

⁶⁷ Sinclair, "Tip O'Neill and Contemporary House Leadership," in *Masters of the House*, p. 315.

In addition to C-SPAN, there was now CNN, a twenty-four-hours a day news channel, a daily *Congressional Quarterly* bulletin, and two 'local' newspapers, *Roll Call* and *The Hill*. In short, we now had a giant screen and loudspeaker to catch all our missteps and misstatements."⁶⁸

As Speaker, Gingrich decided to permit television and radio coverage of his daily press briefings. Gingrich explains the decision like this:

Because we had been so successful at getting our message out before the election, my press secretary Tony Blankley and I still hoped that we might still get at least part of the press on our side. So we decided to hold daily televised press briefings. The daily press briefing was an institution that Democratic Speakers had used for years, but their briefings had been restricted to reporters without cameras. We on the other hand had decided to show how bold and up-to-the-minute media-wise we were. . . . CNN indicated how important it considered these briefings by carrying them live. That alone should have been the tip-off to us that we were playing with fire. But we plunged on. It will thus surprise no one to learn that our press briefings turned out to be an ongoing headache. They got to be little more than a game of "pin the tail on the Speaker."⁶⁹

A congressional reporter who covered Gingrich on a daily basis explained the significance of allowing media coverage of the Speaker's briefings.

In the pre-camera era, speakers comfortably gave one-word answers and reporters barked out short, cryptic questions. In the camera era, answers go on for pages and the questions are elaborate, even pretentious. . . . In the pre-camera era, the reporters who gathered around the speaker's desk in his private office were mostly anonymous worker-bees. In the camera era, network White House correspondents swallow their pride and settle their expensive suits into one of the coveted eight seats at Gingrich's table In the pre-camera era, reporters could run through a dozen or so questions. Jokes were welcome. Humor is a rarity in the camera era—after all, editors have television sets, too. . . . With a regular crowd of about 30 newspaper and magazine reporters and TV producers, Gingrich starts the 20-minute briefing with an opening monologue.⁷⁰

After a particularly intense exchange between Gingrich and a reporter for Pacifica Radio, the Speaker decided to pull the plug on the daily press briefings. They had lasted just a few months of 1995. "Tony Blankley, a spokesman for Gingrich, said May 2, that the decision was due to 'excessively flamboyant questions' from reporters. The staff was also concerned that as they

made the Speaker available to meet the daily and varying demands of reporters, Gingrich was in the limelight far too often. In all, Gingrich had 30 briefings between Jan. 4 and March 29 before stopping the sessions."⁷¹ During the remainder of his speakership, Gingrich met irregularly with reporters. His successor, J. Dennis Hastert (R-IL) conducts infrequent "pad and pen" briefings with journalists.

The media were also at the heart of what Gingrich called the "single most avoidable mistake I made during my first three years as Speaker." He calls it the saga of Air Force One.⁷²

Israeli Prime Minister Rabin had been assassinated in November 1995. President Bill Clinton flew to Israel for the funeral and asked several Members to join him on Air Force One, including Speaker Gingrich and Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (R-KS). At the time, President Clinton and congressional Republicans were having trouble agreeing on how to address the budget for that year, problems that eventually led several Federal agencies to close down later that year because they had not received an appropriation. The Republicans had hoped that on the plane ride back from Rabin's funeral they might have an opportunity to sit down and discuss the budget situation with the President. But Gingrich and Dole were seated at the back of the plane, and they did not have the opportunity to speak with Clinton about this. In addition, Gingrich and Dole were asked to deplane from the rear, again nowhere near Clinton.

Several days later, Gingrich went to a morning breakfast to talk with reporters. There, he says he told reporters that the plane incident showed how hard it was to do business with the Clinton administration.

"If he is genuinely interested in reaching an agreement with us," I said, "why didn't he discuss one with us when we were only a few feet away on an airplane?" Then, I continued, digging my grave a little deeper, "if he wanted to indicate his seriousness about working with us, why did he leave the plane by himself and make us go out the back way?" I said it was both selfish and self-destructive for the President to hog the media by walking down those steps from the plane alone instead of showing a little bipartisanship precisely when he claimed he wanted to reach an agreement with us . . . By

⁶⁸ Gingrich, *Lessons Learned the Hard Way: A Personal Report*, p. 5.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

⁷⁰ Jeanne Cummings, "When Gingrich Holds Court, Washington Listens," *Austin American-Statesman*, Apr. 2, 1995, p. J1.

⁷¹ Donna Cassata, "Gingrich to End News Briefings," *CQ Weekly*, vol. 51, May 6, 1995, p. 1224. Online version.

⁷² Gingrich, *Lessons Learned the Hard Way: A Personal Report*, p. 42.

now my press secretary Tony Blankley was positively white with horror . . . The story exploded almost immediately. Of all the papers, and there were quite a few who put the story on the front page, the worst was the *New York Daily News*, which ran a banner headline on page one that read simply, "Crybaby."⁷³

Blankley characterized the next few days after the story broke as the "single worst press moment" of Gingrich's career. It "all but destroyed his speakership," he said.⁷⁴ The loss of GOP House seats in November 1996 and particularly in 1998 also contributed to the end of Gingrich's career in the House.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between the Speaker and the press, in sum, depends to a great extent on the

individual style of the leader, the context of the times (whether he is the opposition party leader, for example) and the constantly changing media technology. It is unclear, for example, whether Speaker Longworth would be as successful with the press now, in the days of instant Internet news and live television coverage, as he was when personal relationships were the key to getting his message out.

The individual style of the current Speaker, J. Dennis Hastert (R-IL), appears to be headed down a different path from his predecessor Gingrich. While Speaker Hastert does not show the blanket antipathy toward television that Sam Rayburn did, neither does he invite the lime-light.

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 44-45.

⁷⁴ Tony Blankley, *Washington Times* editorial page editor, telephone conversation with author, Aug. 20, 2003.